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Methodological Innovation and Research Ethics: Forces in tension or forces in harmony?

Melanie Nind, Rose Wiles, Andre Bengry-Howell and Graham Crow

University of Southampton

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the tensions inherent in the interaction between ethics and methodological innovation. The authors focus on three cases of innovation in qualitative research methods in the social sciences: netnography, child-led research, and creative research methods. Using thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with the innovators and commentators on the innovations, they discuss the cases in terms of ethical responsibility, the democratisation of research, matters of empowerment, and the relationship between research and the academy. The paper highlights the ways in which innovation does not necessarily equate to taking risks but rather to risk management: the innovators are cautious as much as creative, operating within the context of a culture in which procedural ethical regulation acts to limit methodological development, and in which they (and other users of their method/approach) communicate the safe qualities alongside the innovative qualities of their approach.

Keywords: methodological innovation, ethics, risk, netnography, child-led research, creative methods

Introduction

This paper arises from a research project seeking to explore innovation in research methods and particularly issues of originality, ownership and control of the innovation and development process, methods of diffusion, and the take-up of innovations across disciplines. The research focused on three cases of qualitative research that we identified as innovative (albeit with some trepidation given the inherent difficulty in defining innovation). Our aims were: to explore, from the perspective of key individuals associated with the development of each method or approach, why the method was developed including the original rationale; to explore the views of key adopters, developers, advocates of, or commentators on, the methods regarding ownership, adoption and adaptations to the method; and to identify the academic response to these innovations across disciplines.

In this paper we focus, not on the original core issues as outlined above, but on a related issue that arose during our discussions of the data, that is, the relationship between methodological innovation and research ethics. This was, in part, stimulated by the fundamental and unavoidable question in a study of this nature of whether methodological innovation is inherently a good thing, and thereby associated with some kind of beneficence agenda (Rhodes, 2010), doing good for the research community. Yet the whole relationship between being innovative and being a good and responsible researcher is clearly more complex as ethics is more than the avoidance of harm prioritised in the regulatory approach, but a balance of risk, efficacy, justice and respect (Rhodes, 2010) and promotion of integrity, quality and transparency (ESRC, 2010). Here we discuss some of

the reflections of our research participants and our analysis of those reflections. Moreover, we engage with the desire to be a good and responsible researcher as one of the less frequently discussed drivers of innovation and address the perhaps inevitable tension of research ethics both driving and constraining innovation in research methods and practices.

Background and Methods

Interest in innovation in social research methods is growing and, as Coffey (2010) observes, in the UK this has been regarded as necessary to sustainability. It is clearly part of the agenda for the Economic and Social Research Council as evidenced by its investment in the National Centre for Research Methods with its brief to identify and foster methodological innovation in the UK. Yet innovation in government and research council policy terms is somewhat unformulated and ill-defined and abstract discussion of the phenomenon is limited in usefulness. Similarly, despite increased interest in research ethics, the literature is dominated by 'meta-ethical overview' (Sikes and Piper, 2010: 205). With limited specific ethics literature and limited published exploration of issues such as who innovates and why, how their work becomes recognised as innovative, and who adopts new practices (see Pain, 2009; Travers, 2009; Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009; Wiles, Crow and Pain, 2011;) an approach focusing on particular cases of innovation offered a way of focusing on the nuanced detail of methodological innovation in action.

Case study, Yin (1989: 23) argues, enables the investigation of 'a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. Thus, we could conduct descriptive case studies of methodological innovation in and with their cultural and temporal contexts, that is, within 'a rapidly changing and globalizing world, amidst social progress and change, as well as theoretical developments in multiple traditions both within and across disciplines [where] new research questions are being posed or re-examined' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2008:1). It is amid new questions and insights, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) argue, that new methods have emerged. Phillips and Shaw (2011) illustrate this in their reflections on how the 'call for innovations' (609) in social work research, for example, has come at a time of social and political shifts. They argue the importance of reflecting on how methods are impacted by such shifts but also the need for 'a moral response' in upholding 'core social work values': 'Methodological choices, indeed all aspects of research practices, are not innocent and can rupture or contribute to the negative effects of societal changes' (610). In this project we have sought to gain theoretical insights (Bassey, 1999) and 'unique and universal understanding' (Simons, 1996: 225) of the interaction between methodological innovation and ethics.

Previous research had shown that what is claimed as 'innovative' often relates to adaptations to existing methods or to the transfer and adaptation of methods from other disciplines (Phillips and Shaw, 2011; Wiles et al., 2011); therefore the task of selecting cases of innovation was far from straightforward. Indeed, we know that the roots of the identified innovations do not lie with the named innovators, rather these people have some claim to a critical juncture in their emergence. Ultimately cases were selected that: i) had been in existence in some form for around ten years, to allow time for 'take-up' by the wider social science community; ii) had been identified as 'innovations' through a narrative review (Pain, 2009; Wiles et al., 2011) or other research on

innovation (e.g., Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009); and iii) were qualitative methods. Additionally, the three cases were chosen as exemplars of innovations addressing methodological challenges in terms of enabling the study of a new area of social life; providing insight into aspects of social life that are difficult to access by traditional methods; or managing ethical, access or response issues raised by traditional methods or approaches. They may be filling, what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008: 4) refer to as 'methods gaps'.

The cases comprised:

- 1) Robert Kozinets and 'netnography' - his form of online ethnography;
- 2) Mary Kellett and 'child-led' research - her advancement of children as researchers within developments in participatory research and the new sociology of childhood; and
- 3) David Gauntlett and 'creative research methods' – his development within visual methods, particularly making metaphorical representations of identity with Lego.

We summarise these cases briefly here before describing our own research methods.

Netnography, developed by Robert Kozinets from Canada, sits within a broader methodological context of online/virtual ethnography as a way of researching online communities; as such it represents an exemplar of methods that enable researchers to focus on a new area of social life. There is no one accepted way that online communities should be studied and while online ethnography involving observation of naturally occurring 'postings' and 'threads' within an online forum is common, data collection offline as well as online may be conducted (Hine, 2005). Following rapid developments in the online world there has been burgeoning interest in online research methods including online interviews and the analysis of material from websites, chatrooms, blogs and other forms of social media. Hine's (2000) 'Virtual Ethnography' marked development of methods in this field among a range of publications on the topic from the late 1990s onwards; it is included as one of Hesse-Biber's (2008) emergent methods (Hine, 2008). In Wiles et al.'s (2011) review of claims to innovation, online and e-research methods represented the fourth largest group of innovations among the papers identified. Xenitidou and Gilbert (2009) identified 'netnography' as a form of online ethnography representing an innovation. Kozinets developed his 'netnographic' approach to online research within the relatively new disciplinary field of Marketing and Consumer Research. In netnography he adapts traditional ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities that emerge through computer-mediated communication, and presents this as a new, qualitative, economical, effective and unobtrusive means of studying 'naturally occurring' online communication and behaviour, and generating naturalistic data about online communities (Kozinets 2002; 2010). Kozinets' particular contribution is a pragmatic, applied and systematised approach intended to address many of procedural, ethical and methodological issues specific to online research.

Child-led research is an approach pioneered by Mary Kellett at the Children's Research Centre at the Open University in England. The innovation involves providing training and support to children to enable them to design and carry out their own research projects. Like netnography it is a development of its time, in this case emerging against the backdrop of the new sociology of childhood and moral and ethical standpoints about the importance of children's voice and children as social actors. Kellett (2010) argues children need to lead research on children because of their unique 'insider' perspective which is critical to our understanding of children's worlds, inaccessible

via research led or managed by adults. Like Kozinets, Kellett has popularised her innovation by systematising her approach and published step-by-step guidance – this time on training children in research methods (Kellett, 2005). Child-led research is located within a broader range of participatory approaches which include user-involvement, emancipatory and partnership research (Frankham, 2009) increasingly adopted with groups of people viewed as vulnerable or socially disadvantaged. The child-led research approach pioneered by Kellett represents a method that has sprung from moves to interdisciplinarity, and provides an exemplar of a method or approach developed to manage the ethical, moral and access problems that traditional methods pose. Among the innovation claims reviewed by Wiles et al. (2011), around a third of the 57 papers identified cited moral or ethical reasons for the innovation and many of these related to issues of empowerment.

‘Creative research methods’ developed by David Gauntlett (2007) encompass a range of methods including the visual, performative and sensory. Gauntlett’s creative work has focused in particular on the participant creating something (a photograph, video, drawing, scrapbook, collage or model) which is then used within the research process, usually for data elicitation purposes. He has not particularly branded his work with a soundbite name but his innovative contribution involves the reflective process of creating a three-dimensional artefact notably a Lego model to metaphorically represent the creator’s identity. This case is an exemplar of a method that is claimed to provide insight into aspects of social life that are not accessible by traditional methods. Here the timeliness concerns developments in visual methods more generally which have reached a key point in research awareness (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Among claims to innovation in qualitative research between 2000 and 2009, Wiles et al. (2011) found ‘creative methods’ to be the largest group of innovations among the papers identified. Gauntlett has been exploring the ways in which researchers can embrace people’s ability to create and reflect during the *process* of production.

Our research centred around each of the above three cases of innovation. It comprised a systematic search of the literature to explore the response to the innovations within the academy community plus semi-structured interviews conducted with the innovator and five-six people per case who were able to comment on its usefulness and development. This included: an early career researcher applying or adapting the innovation (for anonymity denoted in this paper as ECR), an experienced researcher in the area (denoted Exp), a book reviewer of the innovator’s work (Rev), a knowledgeable researcher/user of the innovation from a different country to that in which the innovation originated (Int), and one from a different discipline (Disc). Three interviews were conducted via skype, one by email, ten by telephone and the remainder (three) were face-to-face interviews in a venue of the interviewees choosing, usually their workplace. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours and were fully transcribed.

As the study put our peers at the focal point of the research there were accompanying ethical issues which have been reported in similar research (Wiles et al, 2006; Wiles et al, 2012). We were additionally conscious of our responsibility not to invite the participation of innovators and then open those participants up too much to criticism, particularly as their anonymisation was not possible. In response to these vulnerabilities we have provided the innovators with transcripts of their interviews and drafts of all papers for their comment. Other interviewees have been given their transcripts for checking and amending and we have done our best to anonymise them. We acknowledge that while some of criticisms made by interviewees may be inaccurate or easily defended we have not sought such dialogue for our purposes here.

Thematic analysis of the transcriptions addressed the themes of timeliness, distinctiveness, contribution, breakthrough/ acceptance/ impediments to acceptance, and future developments. Within these categories sub-themes were identified and general and specific points related to these identified and highlighted. The analysis culminated in a summary for each case in relation to: 1) Why this, why now? (what accounts for the development of the innovation, what accounts for its success, why it is timely, why this person and not others in the field) 2) Distinctiveness (what is innovative in the method/approach, similarities and differences to other approaches, and limitations of current methods/approaches); 3) Contribution of the innovation (to the substantive area, discipline or methods, how it is innovative, views about the method, limitations of the method); 4) Breakthrough, acceptance and uptake (achieving academic legitimacy, differences according to area/discipline, who uses it and who doesn't, criticism, limiting factors, champions); 4) Future developments (what is likely to happen with the method, whether it is here to stay, potential, what is needed for it to stay current, and others building on/developing the work). The summaries, thematic coding and original transcripts were then re-examined to pursue the question of the interaction between ethics and innovation.

Innovation and ethics: Is innovation inherently a good thing?

The value of qualitative methodological innovation for social science research is debated in the literature. For Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008: 12) 'innovation in the practice of social research is crucial' 'for enhancing our understanding of the human condition'. For Lincoln (2005: 165-6) an attraction of qualitative research is 'the promise and democratic and pluralistic ethics of qualitative practices' with 'a fresh cadre of methodologists committed to seeing social science used for democratic and liberalizing social purposes'. For the ESRC (2010) innovative research is important enough to be worthwhile despite the risk of failing to deliver the usually expected outputs and impact. Phillips and Shaw (2011: 610), in contrast, warn against equating innovation with progress and reform in 'an uncritical romanticisation of any research practice because of its novelty or technological prowess'. Nonetheless, they, as do we, also find sympathy with Denzin's (2010) argument that addressing social justice should characterise researchers' innovations and ethical responsibilities.

Lincoln postulates that 'qualitative research may be compromised or even threatened by the new methodological conservatism being propagated in the name of evidence-based research and "scientifically based educational research"' plus, associated with failures in biomedical research, greater scrutiny by Institutional Review Boards. While Lincoln refers to the USA, this phenomenon is recognisable in the UK and elsewhere (Coffey, 2010). Sikes and Piper (2010), for example, were inspired to edit a journal special issue after their own difficulties getting ethics clearance. They also cite the claim by Israel and Hay (2006: 1) that in the US, Canada, UK, New Zealand and Australia, 'social scientists are angry and frustrated' at their 'work being constrained and distorted by regulators of ethical research who do not understand social science research'. Here we see then the two interacting forces in tension: methodological development pushing forward ethical research practice, and institutionalised research ethics practices pushing back methodological developments.

Amongst our interviewees there was some adoption of the position that methodological innovation is a good thing; one experienced methodologist commented, "of course you want innovation"

(Disc3), and another particularly valued the willingness to “push against” and challenge resisting “brick walls” (Exp5). Sometimes innovation was seen as good in its place (Disc3), that place being “a possibility” among “a whole palette of possible research methods” while critically evaluating its usefulness (Exp4). For one methodologist, there was worry about the politics of innovation whereby newness is valued before methods have been properly evaluated – “about it being this big machine” whereby “the whole aim is to just churn out something just because it’s new”, while “I don’t think, just because it’s new, means it’s going to be any good”; indeed, “you might have new methods, but they might not tell you anything very new or very interesting”. Here we see a different view on the ethical imperative to innovate: “instead of seeing innovation as just applying new methods ... willy-nilly” there is concern with “how we ask new questions and find new ways of seeing the world, and then think[ing] about how we might get at those with different kinds of methods” (Exp4). Another response to this tension was that “innovation doesn’t necessarily lie in method; it lies in our reflexivity towards using the method” (Disc2). Reflecting on our dataset of interview transcripts we lend support to this stance that innovation is as much about reflexivity as about new techniques in themselves. Indeed we go further in this paper by making this link with research ethics also; innovation in research is not so much a research good in and of itself, but often represents a response to a desire to do good, making the innovation an ethical act.

This observation brings us to the issue of drivers for methodological innovation, which may not be transparent in writings about the method or its application, but about which we asked interviewees to reflect. One respondent reflected that, “we tend to assume that methodological change is intellectually driven; which it is, of course ... but the technological affordances are very important” (Rev1). Furthermore, technological innovations can afford researchers opportunities to work with data that are readily available, easily readable by machines and therefore that “grows without a lot of reflexivity”. Technological affordances therefore add to the mix of tensions in the interaction between ethics and innovation and this is a theme particularly pertinent to one of our cases.

In the remainder of the paper we address six main points of reflection with respect to how the desire to develop and apply a methodological innovation in qualitative research meets the desire to do research that is good in quality and/or ethically good. Thus we discuss: the way researchers treat people and the ways in which researchers act responsibly, the democratisation of research – in terms of the ethics of valuing different forms of expertise and the ethic of ‘everyone’, the issue of empowerment and the relationship of research to the academy. We conclude with a consideration on the formal process of ethics peer review. These are all themes that have emerged through the analysis of our interview data.

Treatment of others

A central premise in research ethics is the ethical treatment of others, particularly participants in the research. The desire to treat people well was important to all the innovators. Kozinets was acutely aware of the potential in online research to mine data from online forums, but argued that it is better research and more respectful of the people within online communities to “participate as a typical blog reader or a member of that community member would”, thereby following “communal rules”. For Kozinets, “participation [by the researcher in the online space] doesn’t necessarily mean interfering in some way, it means living as a culture member does”. This respectful stance was welcomed by others adopting the innovation one interviewee noted that Kozinets makes powerful

arguments about the value of this compared with data mining approaches (Rev2). Similarly, the issue of how we treat people was a recurring theme in the interviews concerning child-led research, in which the treatment of children as competent to lead research rather than just provide data, was central for Kellett and other the users of her approach

Similarly influenced by feminist critiques of the researcher-led agenda and approach, and like Kellett and Kozinets, Gauntlett talked of being partly motivated by a desire to avoid research “where you sort of go in, get data, and leave” – he was concerned with creating a “fair kind of relationship” and an interesting and meaningful experience for participants. Following his influence, interviewees using his approach did so in part because it makes research fun (Rev4) and because people enjoy the experience and become relaxed (ECR2). This was not altogether altruistic, however, as enabling participants to “get caught up in this more bodily task” of making in which they “they leave behind some inhibitions” (Rev4), was ultimately about getting better data from them. For one interviewee, such a stance would be right as she argued choice of research methods should not just be because it is the best method for addressing the research question (Exp4). While giving people time to think was part of the rationale and appeal of creative methods, in terms of both research ethics and research quality, this facility was recognised as not peculiar to these kinds of methods (Disc3). Indeed one interviewee cautioned about the need to use methods carefully and reflexively and to take care in making claims about them. The implication here is that the relationship between being innovative and being ethical extends to incorporate the size and nature of the claims made in the process. Intrinsic to some of the reflections was a concern with whether innovators should be making claims to one method being better than others rather than being just another in the tool box to choose from. From this perspective, trying to distinguish innovative methods from traditional ones may be an oversimplification, and it follows perhaps that trying to discern a relationship with research ethics is problematic. It also, however, leads to a second theme emerging from the data – that of innovations reflecting a desire to act responsibly.

Acting responsibly

It was common for our interviewees to consider whether the actions of themselves and others as researchers were responsible. In thinking about his creative methods Gauntlett was sensitive to who can analyse whose data, wanting his participants to interpret their own Lego constructions. One adopter of the method sympathised, wanting to avoid her analytic process leading to her feeling like she was “damaging” or “trampling” over participants (ECR2). Another saw this concern to avoid violating participants words as a failure to undertake analysis and to really address the overlaying of the researcher’s interpretation over the model-maker’s interpretation, even asserting that it is “a bit irresponsible of us to assume somehow that data will speak for itself” and “the subjects of our research will somehow speak for themselves”, as there is “always going to be a process of, of selection and interpretation going on, even if that’s not always explicit” (Disc3).

In some ways netnotgraphy was perceived as a response to the potential offered by technology to behave badly and treat information available online as data without having to negotiate terms, thereby making obtaining consent a nicety rather than a necessity . Kozinets’ approach is explicitly about an ethical response to a challenge arising from the fact that other, similar approaches do not address the ethical and procedural issues he seeks to solve. He explained that in his early work some

of “the biggest questions” that arose were around “is this ethical?” and the ethical treatment of personal information in online spaces. These issues and developing rules of working were important to his developing approach, though he recognised that as more people adopt and adapt ethnography, such rules become “a little bit looser” and that “if that’s acceptable to the editors and to the institutional review boards” then he could “live with it.” Kellett covers similar ground, but with a more hard-line stance as she stressed the importance to her of others acting responsibly in their take-up of the idea of child-led research; she spoke of wanting them to do this in a responsible way in which they provide more opportunities for children and young people to train as researchers while at the same time retaining the purity of the ideas, not diluting them.

Kozinets spoke of an agenda to bring to the method and to the marketing/business world “an anthropologist’s deep respect for the diversity of human gatherings”, “bringing a more respectful view of consumers to those who are ostensibly there to serve them”. For him being rigorous is acting responsibly: “Having a deep experience of ... participating in that community as a member does, rather than, you know, artificially sort of just downloading and coding, or downloading and throwing it into some programming that’s gonna give you some, you know, word map”. For one interviewee (Disc1), it was the temptation to not act responsibly that was largely countered by Kozinets in his approach, and the ease of accessing and downloading data was countered by Kozinets’ call for rigour in terms of the ethnographic need to immerse oneself in online communities and really learn about the topic or community one is studying. Disc3 was aware that in online worlds “you don’t have to represent who you are” or “give much information about yourself”, but argued that netnotgraphy addresses such ethical tensions. Similarly, another commentator observed that “all of the online research methods have hit upon common set of problems, which they have to solve ... or learn to live with”, but innovators like Kozinets have done “some of the thinking” about the “huge ethical issues” (Rev2). Another interviewee explained that “there are different schools of thought on whether it is ethical as a researcher to kind of lurk within these communities, or whether or not you need to disclose your identity” (Int1), and the implication of this was that if netnotgraphy becomes more popular the ethical debate will need further attention.

For the interviewees who expressed reservations about the innovators’ responsible actions, one concern was whether the innovators engaged with critiques of their work (though Kozinets regarded this as essential to bolstering a method and achieving academic legitimacy). For some interviewees this was seen as a responsible thing to do, but not always done (Rev4). This again connects with over-claiming in which “maybe the enthusiasm is going a bit too far” (Exp4), bringing the danger of proliferation of a technique without people thinking through the underlying epistemology and ontology.

Democratisation – diverse experts

Common across the cases, and reflecting broader trends in the social sciences was a willingness to see participants (or children) as having an alternative, legitimate expertise to that of academic researchers. For Kozinets this was why immersion in online discussions of their experiences and lives is important. For Gauntlett, it was why the researcher should not interpret the Lego models of their identities that participants make, but rather leave that job to the participants who he said were “the expert on their own lives, or at least, on the thing that they’ve made ... with the intention of telling you something about their own lives”. For one adopter of the method this use of Lego was

important for breaking down the traditional researcher-participant 'power dimension' (ECR2). For Kellett, of course, children's expertise is central to her drive for child-led research. She was adamant that children "create knowledge that we [adults] couldn't necessarily create. And they can analyse in a way that, we don't analyse, because ... sometimes they see things that we don't".

This valuing of expertise beyond the research community can be regarded as an ethical stance, though it is rarely explicitly communicated as such. It relates to Lincoln's (2005: 165) 'democratic and pluralistic ethics of qualitative practices' and encompasses the recognition that people are experts by experience. For Kellett children have "a better understanding of what contemporary childhoods are" by dint of living them; this makes them distinct and leads to a privileging of their insider perspectives. Her drive to train children to conduct their own research, she explained, reflects not just their perceived competence to do so but her desire to get "back to the raw purity of just what the kids see through their eyes" without adult mediation. There was an urgency about children setting the research agenda, because what they think is important might not be the same as that which adults prioritise for research. This is where Kellett was seen by those we interviewed as pushing beyond just valuing children's expertise into giving them real power "to produce knowledge about children" (Int2). Interviewees (Int2, Disc2) saw how this connects this innovation with feminist research and with emancipatory research in the disability field.

It was clear to the interviewees that it is the extent to which Kellett pushes the commitment "to working with children in a much more engaged, equal way" (Disc2) and the drive to put children at the centre of research that is innovative, rather than the idea itself. There was seen to be real timeliness in the methodological approach as it links so closely to the "participation agenda nationally ... and the movement towards children's rights internationally", reflecting "years of people talking about the child as agent" within the new sociology of childhood (Disc2). There were also mentions of the echoes of the trend toward involving lay-researchers, and while this interviewee recognised the tension that once we teach children research skills their positioning as lay people changes as we encourage them "to look at the world through our lenses", another (ECR1) found the professional angle to involving children appealing.

While supporting the essential ethics of valuing children's active engagement in research, one interviewee questioned whether children should be leading research regardless of the research question, seeing the danger of becoming "caught up in a zeitgeist of thinking this is what we should be doing" (Disc2). Another, applauded the ethical dimension of children's research engagement, seeing this as an "extremely good example of taking children's voice very seriously", wholly appropriate amid article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Exp3). Seeing himself as at leading edge of involving children as active participants in research for ethical reasons, he acknowledged both how Kellett has pushed further, and also the problematic nature of the whole issue of "what is that insider knowing that children have, and how it relates to various modes of adult knowing". The idea that children have "privileged", "utterly unique knowledge" was questioned from a social constructionist angle in which one needs to understand that "children's ways of knowing other children, are themselves informed by all the other discourses that are around", "not devoid of influence from the adult world" (Exp3). It was put to us that children don't have the only view on childhood and that their voice is, in any case, mediated by research techniques. Even among those highly sympathetic to the ethics of this innovation, the realist

epistemology and the boundaries created (between children and adults) were troubling enough for them to resist privileging children's standpoint knowledge to the extent that Kellett does in her work.

Democratisation – research methods to reach everyone

Linked to, but distinct from, the idea of democratisation of knowledge production through valuing others as experts is the idea, also large in these data, of democratisation of research through methods that reach everyone. Gauntlett was explicit about this in that he sees real value in Lego as levelling the field of research methods – a material everyone can use regardless of professional or other status. Gauntlett spoke of his interest in the potential of Lego to draw in people who may be inhibited by notions of their inability to articulate or draw, because the medium is less limiting “people can formulate what they really think” and what want to say about an issue. They can also “reflect on themselves more clearly, by having gone through that process”; that ‘everyone’ can work in Lego was central to Gauntlett's thinking and an ethical driver behind the method.

The reality of the ethic of everyone was not shared by all the interviewees reflecting on Gauntlett's creative methods, however. While one experienced methodologist and supporter of creative methods, similarly saw Lego as “a neutral medium” (Exp5), this notion was also critiqued as not necessarily suited to “people who don't feel artistic” (Exp4). Nonetheless, an attraction for those using the approach was that it was seen as a more participatory approach, with potential to reach groups less suited to a straightforward interview. One user of the method talked of “getting at those more subconscious or unconscious impressions” (Rev4), though he saw Lego as one of many options for this. Another talked of “the combination of giving people time, creating an environment of play, and then having the kinaesthetic experience of actually moving the fingers and thinking” as giving people “a kind of permission to talk and express their ideas” (ECR2). This, in part, is where the claims are seen by others as too bold, when Gauntlett and others make judgements and say that compared to other methods these represent a “more rich and meaningful way of asking people to express things” (Gauntlett), a way of “unlocking” (ECR2).

For those who do use the method of making with Lego for its power in helping people to express themselves, an ethical dimension was, however, raised by this very power. Gauntlett himself acknowledged that it can be “emotionally revealing ... getting a bit too intimate or personal” at times as people open up and make an “emotional or meaningful investment in the metaphor” created. There are strong criticisms though that using Lego in the way described doesn't ‘unlock’ ‘essential knowledge’, but rather the models constructed are a reflection of a specific socio-cultural contextⁱ (Exp4, Disc3).

The idea of reaching everyone is important in Kellett's work too. Users of her ideas spoke of how she has wanted to extend, to as many children as possible, the opportunity to do research, being innovative by reaching down into younger groups than previously involved (Exp2). For advocates of child-led research there was an agenda about getting marginalised groups heard (Int2), but there was also some recognition that even within child-led research, “only certain people get to take part in participation agendas” with the risk of kinds of exclusivity (Disc2).

Empowerment

The theme of research as empowerment was strong in the creative methods and child-led research cases. With regard to the former, one experienced commentator identified that the notion of creative methods rests “on a certain notion of research as a form of empowerment” (Disc3) with researchers empowering participants by giving them means to express their voices. This interviewee sympathised with the political intention but noted the notion of reaching the participants’ true identity is flawed (“Identity is not something we have ... identity is something we do”, Disc3) and he claimed, it is still the case that Gauntlett and other researchers retain their power and define the parameters. Gauntlett himself denied making claims about empowerment but identified a desire to aid participants’ voice by offering a creative process in which they can edit along the way of making their product and using it to explain and reflect. Championing the approach though, one interviewee (Exp5) did argue that using Lego as Gauntlett advocates ‘empowers’ participants by giving them some control over the interview process.

With regard to developing child-led research Kellett was clear about her empowerment goals. She talked about promoting the method and the “empowerment principles” arguing that, “I guess my driver, what gets me out of bed in the morning, is empowering children”. She reflected on seeking to “facilitate access to really prestigious platforms to get them [children] noticed” and to give voice to children and *their* research. For Kellett this was a matter of entitlement – children have a ‘right’ to a “valid research voice”, though she perceived fear of children’s empowerment and foresaw backlash “if children become too agentic”. For interviewees with great respect for Kellett’s work this empowerment discourse was nonetheless problematic. One interviewee commented, “I’m sure it attempts to empower children”, but qualified this with the observation that the idea of some people empowering others raises all kinds of questions as “empowerment itself is such a vexed issue” (Int2). Kellett’s efforts were seen to have gone into praxis rather than theorisation leaving more work to be done on theorising empowerment in children’s research. Notwithstanding this, and some questions regarding how, paradoxically, the research methods in which Kellett trains child-researchers are very traditional, Exp3 summed up that “in terms of empowering children” her work was “radical”.

Relationship with the academy and formal ethics review

We began our discussion of the interaction between methodological innovation and ethical research practice by highlighting the role of institutionalised research ethics regulation. Here we return to the relationship between innovation and the academy by drawing on the data from this study on this theme. We have argued that innovation may be influenced by drives for democratisation, but some of our interviewees questioned whether there was any broadening in access to the privileges of the academy, with one noting that: “Academia is a pretty institutionalised place to bring children into” (Int2). Indeed the whole development of child-led research brings into focus the role of the academy in gate-keeping practices and standards and Int2 saw the “benchmarking processes” in universities as marginalising innovations like co-authoring with children. This is awkward, of course, for as Disc2

pointed out, “it would have been very cynical of the academy to be pursuing this child-as-active-subject theoretically and conceptually, but continue to hold the research practice to themselves”. Nonetheless, it raises critical questions about “who gets to count as a credible researcher” and it highlights the “tension between participation and rigour” (Disc2) when other kinds of experts enter the academic domain. One measure may be whether children’s research is published, which another supporter of this kind of work had found to be difficult, especially if children are co-authors, when papers are rejected as not “sophisticated enough” (Exp2). Another key measure may be whether the innovations ever attract research funding: it is “not enough for the academy to believe that it’s a worthwhile methodology ... there has to be a cultural acceptance that lay-, whether children or not, led research is acceptable ... and I don’t think we’re anywhere near that” (Exp3).

Kellett explained that she covers ethics in the first day of her three-day training for child-researchers and aims at the “same level of ethics as adult research”. Managing ethics approvals is one benchmarking role the academy retains and Kellett was greatly respected by one interviewee (Int2) for battling through and getting ethics approval for child researchers operating through the Children’s Research Centre. She noted how in other countries, including her own Australia, the formal ethics processes were so institutionalised that this would not be possible. Usually concerned with protecting children from researchers, it is an unusual situation for ethics committees to review research by children, turning some of the surveillance-protection discourses and practices on their head.

Kozinets reported finding that institutional review boards, conscious of the “potential for harm” in online research “had no idea how to handle this at the beginning”. One interviewee noted that what Kozinets did not do, “which North American Social Scientists are very prone to do, is to get hung up on the whole regulatory governance thing” (Rev1). His response to the ethical issues had been to try to understand them – “and then doing what you have to do” – it was, this commentator said, about “being ethical first” with “ethical compliance” contained within this (Rev1). Rev1 supports Lincoln’s (2005) stance that, “particularly in North America, the procedural thing, the regulatory thing *hijacked* all of that [ethical discussion].” The innovators in these cases seemed to be tackling the ethics issues head-on rather than through paying lip service to them.

Discussion and Conclusion: Innovation, ethics and risk

There are limitations to this research, which has not involved particularly innovative methods or observing methodological innovation in situ. It has, however, involved in depth discussion of processes in their contemporary and historical contexts and, in a way that has not been done before, explored different rationales, constructions and complex stories surrounding innovation and ethics. In the paper we have taken research ethics to be much more than the basic anonymity, confidentiality and so on that can preoccupy ethics review boards’ protectionist discourses. We have shared our criteria for regarding methods as innovative and used the three case studies of qualitative researchers making methodological innovations to explore the relationship between innovation and ethics. We have acknowledged the need for caution in applying the label of methodological innovation, but discuss this further elsewhere (authors, 2011, in progress). We acknowledge, too, Hammersley’s (2008) argument that radicalism in qualitative research emerging now, rather than being novel, is a return to earlier radical orientations.

Israel and Hay (2006: 1), when pondering the 'division, mistrust and antagonism' between ethics regulators and social scientists, argue this is both disturbing and ironic given their shared starting point 'that ethics matter'. Analysing our data, we certainly found that ethics are important to the innovators and to those who respond to, use, and regulate their methods. Their innovations are not a response to unethical practice (in the UK the ESRC (2005) have conceded there is little evidence of such), but they are in some ways a response to the potential for less than ethical practice, and to the drive to be as fair and participatory as possible in our methods. A characteristic in common across the three areas of innovation is that they are operating in what are often perceived to be ethically risky domains (the internet, children, and visual methods).

In pushing at the boundaries of established methodological practice, the innovators are involved in managing (not eliminating) risk related to their own career development and standing (see the characteristics of innovators discussed by Klein (1990) and Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008)). We acknowledge that the innovators also risked making themselves vulnerable by taking part in this study and our own responsibility to act with integrity in this process. The culture of ethics regulation further adds to the need to manage the riskiness of methodological innovation. Interestingly, Gauntlett, and to a greater extent Kozinets and Kellett, have sought to codify their methods, creating step-by-step guides (Kellett, 2005; Kozinets, 2010). These may not conform to notions of innovators being creative, but perhaps instead reflect the cultures in which these academics are operating; the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2010: 3) is emphatic: 'Risks should be minimised'. The innovators communicate to others that their innovations are contained, not too dangerous, and definitely not ethically risky. Sikes and Piper (2008, 2010) criticise ethics review committees for positioning researchers as irresponsible; these case studies show the opposite to be the case in demonstrating the researchers' strong drives to act responsibly while moving forward methodologically. As we hope we have begun to illuminate in this paper, both ethics and innovation are as much about reflexivity as about technique and here we foster reflection on the relationship between the two. Moreover, we show how the relationship, characterised by an evident tension, may also be characterised by a reciprocity which has hitherto been relatively unexplored.

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ⁱ David Gauntlett noted in personal correspondence that this is a misunderstanding, and that from his perspective the models do reflect a snapshot of a particular socio-cultural moment rather than offering an 'essentialist' view of identity.